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DEFENSE ISSUES

America's military is a values-based organization. It acknowledges these values are fragile and do not just happen. The military teaches them, nurtures them and talks about them. We need to do the same in our families, at work and in our communities.

Volume 13 Number 6

Fifty Years on the Road to Equal Opportunity

Prepared remarks of Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson, USA, commander, U.S. Army Materiel Command, for the DoD Black History Month Observance, the Pentagon, Feb. 5, 1998.

Secretary de Leon, thank you for that kind introduction. I want to extend a special thanks to all of the dedicated people in the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity responsible for coordinating today's event -- "50 Years on the Road to Equal Opportunity: A Celebration of Executive Orders 9980 and 9981." ...

It is fitting that we celebrate today's event as part of Black History Month because no other institution has paved the road for integration and the acceptance of diversity more than the United States Department of Defense. Yes, DoD is and continues to be a model for all to emulate. Granted, we are not perfect and have, in fact, encountered some unfortunate situations recently, but we are an organization committed to aggressively working to provide an environment where all people have the equal opportunities outlined in these executive orders.

July 26 of this year marks the 50th anniversary of the signing of these orders, which paved the way for full participation of all Americans regardless of color, national origin or religion in our federal government and armed forces, thus decreeing equal opportunity for all.

President Truman's signature on these documents showed that America is a nation that has as its basic foundation a commitment to ensure equality for all people. Today's ceremony is further testament to our nation's commitment to fairness and equality.

Today, I would like to share with you some of the contributions that African Americans have made to military history. Then, I will share some thoughts on where I think we are and what, we as a nation, need to focus on as our country enters the 21st century.

Before I begin, I would like to share a part of scripture from First Samuel, which illustrates that many of the struggles we encounter today with social inequities were similar to the struggles society encountered during biblical times. With great faith, David said to Saul, and I quote:

"The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine. Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you."

Reflecting on this scripture, which highlights the struggle between David and Goliath, ... we as a democracy, have made much progress in defeating many of the Goliaths which have plagued our nation and have contributed to social disharmony. But our work is not yet complete. And regardless of our current position in life, we all must emulate the actions of David, -- who, though small in stature, physical strength and social standing, -- desired to make a difference, believed he could make a difference, and consequently did make a difference.

Two months ago, I had the rare privilege to make some remarks at the opening premier of the TNT television movie "Buffalo Soldiers." In attendance were two Buffalo Soldiers who remembered life in an

Army and society segregated by legislation. Legislation that upheld "separate, but equal laws."

As I spoke with and listened to these courageous men, I was truly humbled by the sacrifices that they had endured. You see, while they defended the values and principles that have been the backbone of our democracy since 1775, when our forefathers drew arms against the British at Lexington and Concord, they did not benefit fully from their sacrifices. And yet, they, like those before them, continued to serve. Why?

In my mind, I quickly reviewed all the times that Americans responded to the call of duty in defending our country.

As early as 1770, a distinguished patriot, Crispus Attucks, paid the supreme sacrifice at the start of the Boston Massacre. During the American Revolution, some 3,000 African-American soldiers contributed to the American colonies winning their independence. In the Civil War, nearly 180,000 African Americans fought honorably in support of the Union.

The Buffalo Soldiers, officially authorized by Congress in 1866, campaigned throughout unsettled territory in the West for over 20 years. African Americans gallantly fought during the Spanish-American War, and who can forget the achievements of the 369th (Hellfighters) Infantry Regiment who supported the French army in World War I, and subsequently received the French government's highest military award for bravery in combat.

The Tuskegee Airmen in World War II and individuals like [Army] Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., [Air Force] Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James [the first four-star African-American general], and Rev. Dovey J. Roundtree [one of the first African-Americans to join the Women's Army Corps during World War II] are clearly American heroes deserving of special recognition in our history. These are but a few examples ... The list goes on and on.

Again I asked myself, "Why did they continue to faithfully serve if they did not enjoy the fruits of their sacrifice?" And then, I remembered the words of Mr. Harold Ickes, secretary of interior, when asked in 1941: What constitutes an American? Ickes states:

"Not color, not race, not religion, not pedigree of family, nor place of birth, not social standing, not size of his bank account, not his trade, nor her profession." An American, said Ickes, is one who loves justice and has a deep and abiding respect for the dignity of men and women. An American, said Ickes, will fight for his freedom and that of his neighbor. An American will forgo ease and property and security in order to preserve for himself and for his children the rights of free men and women.

But, you say, they did not enjoy the rights of free men and women. Well, I argue it was their love for God and country, coupled with their belief in the future that inspired them to be the Davids who fought against the Goliaths of segregation, inequality and social disharmony with the unbounded faith that, one day, their gallant efforts would make a difference.

Certainly, today's celebration confirms that they did. And for this, we should all be grateful, as it was the actions of these unsung heroes and heroines who inspired men and women like Miss Rosa Parks, President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Lyndon B. Johnson, and countless others to be the Davids of America who continued to raise America's conscience against the Goliaths of segregation, unequal treatment and social disharmony.

Looking at today, we should be pleased with the many gains we have made in America. And, while the signing of these executive orders, which we commemorate today, has not been a panacea for curing all the social ills affecting society at large, we in DoD can be proud of the progress we have made.

Yes, DoD, and particularly the military, continues to be a place for all to find opportunities for both professional development and social harmony.

You see, day in and day out, there are hundreds of thousands of Defense Department personnel scattered

throughout the globe working

side by side regardless of branch of service, component, rank, race, sex or religion. Their dedication to moral justice, their teamwork and discipline allow them to overcome any differences they may have with each other for the sake of a common good.

Therefore, I think, collectively, as a nation, we need to take the lessons learned from the Department of Defense and act as Davids in our fight against those Goliaths of today which include misunderstanding, complacency and prejudice. Because if we leave these Goliaths unchecked, they will continue to grow insidiously like a cancer out of control.

First, to overcome misunderstanding we must act as a strong family where differences of opinion are respected, consideration for others is valued and practiced, and open communication is the norm.

Everyone here knows that within most families there are differences among the members. It is these individual characteristics that make each of us unique and may, at times, cause family tension. However, in a family bound by love, human dignity, consideration for others and open dialogue, individuals will set aside their own agenda for the good of the whole. This is what I see as critical to all of America.

If we are to continue to battle the Goliath of misunderstanding, we, acting as a family, must celebrate our diversity, must listen to each other, and must be considerate of each other and respect each other. Simply stated, we must live by the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you."

Second, we need to combat complacency at home, in the work place and in the community at large. I believe that our acceptance of the way things are have contributed to many ills in society that people acknowledge, but cannot seem to combat. Daily, we see evidence of these ills, which transcend race, religion and economic standing. But let me say that Wilson believes that these problems are directly related to an erosion in basic values.

One of the strengths of America's military is that it is a values-based organization. The military acknowledges that these values are fragile and just do not happen. The military teaches them, nurtures them and talks about them. We, as a nation, need to do the same in our families, at work, and in our communities.

Finally, we must continue to believe in the American dream and instill this belief in our children. Like many of you, I have been to many locations around the world and have witnessed firsthand the devastation that prejudice and hatred can inflict on a nation. Our America continues to be the hope and promise of the world. We must teach our children to reject the Goliath of prejudice.

By using our democracy, we can illustrate what is possible not only through legislation, but also through commitment and education. Most importantly, we ourselves can be role models who uphold equal treatment and respect for all.

With this in mind, we, within the DoD community, cannot afford to rest on our laurels and become too content. We, as an institution, cannot allow a system that produced great patriots like the ones we will honor today in the [Pentagon] "Stars for America" exhibit to operate without a conscience. We must not allow this exhibit to give us a false sense of security that all is well because of the 9,900 active duty flag officers in the military between 1940-1997, 156, or 1.8 percent, have been African Americans; and the numbers are lower for other minority groups. Clearly, in my view, we as an institution can do better.

Therefore, I contend, while we are making progress, those of us in leadership positions have a moral responsibility to guard against complacency in the system. We cannot stand by idly observing the process (hoping that it will work) without helping the process. We must ensure that America's military continues to be an institution where all members are represented throughout all levels of the DoD hierarchy.

Further, as this great nation enters the 21st century, we must challenge each other to become Davids in

the fight against those Goliaths of today, which act as roadblocks on our nation's continuing journey to social harmony and understanding.

Finally, again, to those of us in leadership roles who are charged with ensuring that the system is fair and sensitive to all, at the end of the day, as we reflect on our daily actions, we should be able to say in unison, as did African-American brethren from long ago sang: "It is well, it is well with my soul."

Thank you, and God bless.

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